

Parental Control Software

The internet can be a dangerous place for kids. Karl Wright looks at programs that aim to make the web safe for children

The internet has changed the way we relate to information. Type a question into a search engine and hit enter, and you have the answer. However, there's also a lot of rubbish on the net – and lots of weirdos, too.

As a parent, you need something that lets your kids view all the interesting stuff on the web but protects them from inappropriate content or, worse, contact with people who might abuse their trust. A good parental control program allows you to specify what your kids can look at, how they can use tools such as instant messaging programs, what personal details they can give out over the web and so on. It lets you specify what type of content a child can view (whether they

can view sex education sites but not adult material, for instance). You should be able to create accounts for more than one child, so that, for example, a teenager's surfing is less restricted than that of a younger child.

A good program will run in the background without the user being aware of it, but will give you the option of warning the user when he is doing something he shouldn't. It will also collect information in the form of a log, allowing you to see exactly what sites are being accessed and making it possible to trace a user's web activity. The software should also let you block or unblock specific sites. Finally, parental control software should be easy to use – otherwise you just won't use it, or you won't use it properly.

Suite action Internet security suites

Many internet security suites have some form of parental control function. There are many advantages to getting your parental control software in this way. It will be compatible with your other security programs, so you won't have your anti-virus program detecting bits of your parental control software as malware, for instance. Also, instead of being faced with lots of different programs to learn, your parental controls are part of your system's security suite, so once you've learned how that works you're sorted.

However, there are some drawbacks. The most obvious one is that in order to get everything as a

single package you may have to compromise on the quality of some components; the manufacturer of the best anti-virus program on the market probably isn't the manufacturer of the best parental control software as well. You also need to make sure, as far as possible, that any suite you choose will be compatible with your future needs. Some current programs, for instance, will not run under Windows Vista. Realising that you'll have to get rid of your anti-virus program because it's not Vista-compatible is annoying; discovering that you have to get rid of your anti-virus, anti-spyware, firewall and parental control software is just infuriating.

Cleaning Windows Windows Vista parental controls

If your PC runs Windows Vista – although not Vista Business – you may not need to spend money on parental control software. The feature is built into the operating system and can be accessed through the Control Panel. Compared to the software in this test, however, Vista's controls are basic. They allow you to filter website content, set time limits on computer usage, control who installs what games and specify which programs a user can run.

At its strictest, Vista's Parental Controls make the web almost impossible to use by blocking everything but recognised kids' sites. This means it blocks search engines, so unless you can remember the web address you need, you're stuffed. On the medium setting, however, the filter blocked almost all the unsuitable content in our tests.

The program control feature lists every program on your PC but doesn't tell you what they are, so you're left to decipher a cryptic list of paths and components. Do you need to enable the Image Ready drops in the Photoshop folder for Photoshop to work, for example? Programs are sensibly listed under Programs and Features (the new Add/Remove Programs feature), so why not here, too?

The time filter feature works well, but we would expect it to. The Game Controls allow or disallow the installation of games based on each game's rating, with the option to block or allow unrated games. This also works fine. Activity reports can be viewed from the user's settings under Control Panel/Parental Controls. The reports are comprehensive, telling you which sites have been visited, which have been blocked, what games have been installed and also giving details of instant messaging conversations and emails sent and received.



▲ The parental controls in Vista are useful, but rather basic compared to the software in this round-up

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CENTIPEDE NETWORKS FilterPak

★★★

£29 inc VAT

In some ways, FilterPak's filters are the strictest in this test. We told it to block news and entertainment sites, assuming this meant the *National Enquirer* or the *Sunday Sport*. We were surprised that the filter blocked access to the CBeebies website. It also blocks the homepage of Microsoft's Encarta encyclopedia because it contains religious content (assuming you've activated the 'religion' filter). We'd have expected the program to be more intelligent.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple to use
- ✗ Not many features
- ✗ Filters not intelligent

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 233MHz processor, 64MB RAM
SUPPLIER Centipede 001 918 524 1010
DETAILS www.centipedenetworks.com

Unfortunately, this rigour was not uniformly applied. The program let us view a Google image search for 'torture', with predictably unpleasant results. We were also disappointed to discover that, although there are filters for violence and criminal activity, there's no filter specifically for things such as religious and racial extremism. Worse still, even with the filters for religion, criminal activity and violence activated, the program allowed us to view the website of the armed Islamic movement Hizbullah while blocking the Church of England's website.

The strictness of its filters aside, FilterPak is the most basic program on test. It consists almost entirely of a list of filters that you can enable or disable, and has very few extra or advanced features. The virtue of this



▲ FilterPak is basic, consisting almost entirely of a list of filters that you enable or disable

approach is that it makes the software easy to use. However, if its selling point is that it's basic but effective and unthreatening, we'd expect it to be cheaper than the other programs here.

Even if it did a consistently good job, FilterPak doesn't do enough to justify its price. Crawler Parental Controls is far more effective, and it's free.

CONTENTWATCH Net Nanny 5.6

★★★★★

£30 inc VAT

Net Nanny is probably the best-known parental control software. The interface is easy to use, with everything you need on one screen. The program passed all our standard tests with flying colours, blocking access to pornographic content, extremism, gambling and violence. It could distinguish encyclopedia entries on racism from racist websites, and it recognised and blocked UK specific-terms of racial and sectarian abuse.

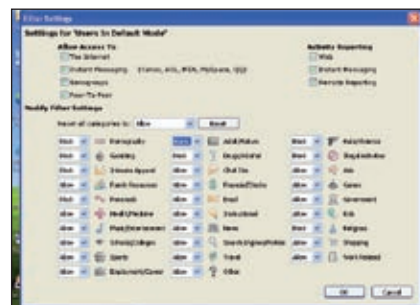
SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple reporting feature
- ✓ Blocked all inappropriate content
- ✗ Hard to customise

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP/Vista, 32MB RAM, 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER http://shop.avanquest.com/uk
DETAILS www.netnanny.com

The program monitors instant messaging programs by default, but doesn't block inappropriate content. This isn't as daft as it might seem, as it's almost impossible to create IM filters that people can't get around in some way. It's almost better to monitor their behaviour on the fly. If you look at the logs regularly, you will at least be able to intervene should you come across a problem. Happily, the reporting function works well and is easy to use.

Net Nanny is easy to set up. It allows you to create user profiles associated with Windows user accounts, so each account is monitored automatically by its own profile. This, however, is where things started to come unstuck. We tried to customise our 'adult' account to allow us to view all



▲ Net Nanny is easy to set up, letting you create user profiles and modify filter settings

content, while the 'kids' accounts were restricted. But even when we set the adult's account to unrestricted, the program interfered, preventing us from viewing adult content. Try as we might, we couldn't make it behave.

This is a good program and passed all our tests, but it can be overly restrictive.

CRAWLER Parental Controls

★★★★★

Free



As this software is free, our expectations weren't all that high. However, it has all the features you'd expect in a paid-for program, and it's also easy to use.

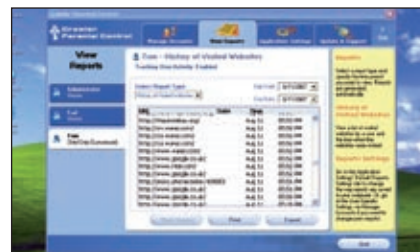
Like many programs we tested, Parental Controls missed some particularly British search strings, such as certain sectarian insults used in Scotland and Northern Ireland. When it does know a word or phrase, however, the program is intelligent enough to distinguish

between legitimate and illegitimate use. It blocked racist websites, but allowed us to access encyclopedia articles on the history of racism.

The software did equally well in most of our other tests. It blocked all access to pornographic material, whether through a search engine or a web address typed straight into our browser. Nor were we able to access material about violence, weapons, gambling or pirated downloads; the program was even intelligent enough to block only BitTorrent downloads that it recognised

as either inappropriate or copyrighted. We were a little disappointed to find that it blocked MSN Messenger entirely, though, rather than filtering or recording conversations.

Like all the other programs here, Parental Controls has a time-limit feature that allows you to



▲ Parental Controls' View Reports feature allows you to track all user activity

specify when a given user is allowed to go online. As with the other programs here (except FilterPak), this feature worked perfectly. We won't mention it again, but you can assume it's there.

There doesn't appear to be a catch. We thought the software probably installed some sort of spyware or marketing cookies, but we ran two anti-spyware programs and couldn't find any. Parental Controls can be over-zealous, but otherwise it's a very good piece of software.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Free
- ✓ Good features
- ✗ May install cookies

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 10MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.crawlerparental.com
DETAILS www.crawlerparental.com

CYBERPATROL

CyberPatrol 7.6

★★★★★
£26 inc VAT

CyberPatrol passed most of our standard tests with ease. It was easy to set up, automatically detected when we created a user profile with the same name as a Windows user account, and always ran with the relevant user profile active when that account was used.

It blocked everything we'd expect it to, refusing to let us search for obscene words and blocking access to websites with violent, pornographic, extremist or gambling-related content. It dealt appropriately with UK-specific search terms, blocking 'happy slapping' videos, for instance.

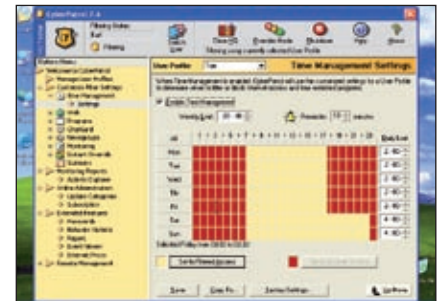
SUMMARY

- ✓ Intelligent filters
- ✓ Useful instant override
- ✗ Chat filters hit and miss

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/NT 4/2000/XP/Vista, Pentium II processor, 64MB RAM, 30MB disk space
SUPPLIER SurfControl 01260 296180
DETAILS www.cyberpatrol.com

It was also intelligent enough to discriminate between different uses of many terms and phrases – blocking access to key generators for pirated software but allowing us access to free encryption key generators. When we tried to get around the filter by using Windows Task Manager to turn off CyberPatrol, our internet connection stopped working. However, if you do need to give a user profile unlimited access (say you're doing maintenance from that account and need to re-enable downloads), you can use the password-protected instant-override feature.

Chat-filtering was less impressive. At first, it didn't block anything, even when we made blatantly improper suggestions couched in the most obscene terms. When we customised the default filters, the software seemed to do much better. When we gave our lurid come-ons another try, it stopped



▲ CyberPatrol has some intelligent filters that you can customise, including Time Management

accepting messages. It recognised and blocked our credit card number, even when it was typed without spaces between the four-digit blocks. But when we typed blocked words or phrases with other characters in between the letters – such as 's*e*x' instead of 'sex' – it didn't know what to do and let the offending words pass.

Apart from one or two small glitches this is a good program, but it's not as good as some others.

GUARDWARE

iShield Plus

★★★★★
£30 inc VAT

Like FilterPak, iShield had some difficulties with its filters. It blocked a *Time* magazine article on Latin American Pentecostalism because it contained references to dating, but it allowed a couple of casino websites to slip through its gambling filter and let us view websites about the AK-47 and Smith and Wesson, even with filtering level set to strictest and the weaponry filter active. It also allowed us to view a Google image search for the word 'torture'.

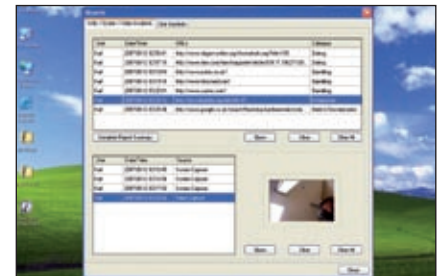
SUMMARY

- ✓ Well designed
- ✓ Great reporting
- ✗ Some content not blocked

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 133MHz processor, 32MB RAM
SUPPLIER Guardware 08700 660794
DETAILS www.guardware.co.uk

It's a shame iShield had trouble with its filters (although it blocked all pornographic, obscene and extremist content we tried to access) because in many other ways it's one of the best-designed programs on test. The interface is easy to use and all the important settings can be accessed from one screen. The main controls are simple, so novice users will quickly get the hang of them.

As well as the normal web-filtering function, the program can block unsuitable content in almost any application. It monitors content onscreen and, if it sees something that looks inappropriate, it prevents the user looking at it and locks the PC, although you also have the option of simply warning the user that they're being naughty. The feature takes a few seconds to kick in, so the user will



▲ The reporting feature in iShield Plus consists of a list of websites viewed and files opened

catch a glimpse of some flesh, but that's it. The reporting feature was also well done, consisting of a list of websites viewed and files opened. A screenshot shows each file that the program has blocked, and files and websites can be viewed from within the interface.

This is a good program, but its filters need to be more consistent.

INTERNET SAFETY.COM

Safe Eyes 5.0

★★★★★
£29 inc VAT

Safe Eyes stores its settings on the company's central server as well as locally. The idea is that this provides you with an extra layer of security to help prevent against tampering.

Unfortunately, it also means your usernames have to be unique across the program's entire database of users.

Otherwise, this program was OK. It didn't block a racist website about Pakistanis, but it could have been thrown by the fact that the website

SUMMARY

- ✓ Blocked bad content
- ✓ Good features
- ✗ Doesn't block IM content

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 20MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.internetsafety.com
DETAILS www.internetsafety.com

was Indian rather than British. This was the only extremist content it didn't manage to block. It also stopped us viewing all pornographic, violent, gambling and weapons-related sites that we tried to look at, and prevented us downloading copyrighted material from peer-to-peer networks.

You can either block or monitor instant messaging programs; there's no way to filter or block messages based on their content.

Fortunately, it's easy to view reports; simply right-click the program in the taskbar and you can see transcripts of IM conversations. As long as you exercise a little vigilance you should easily be able to prevent any problems.

Uniquely, the program also allows you to prevent users posting specified information such as their



▲ Using Safe Eyes, you can prevent users posting specified personal details to social networking sites

address, school and so on to social networking sites. However, the same information can still be sent using an instant messenger, so it's debatable how useful this feature really is.

As with the other programs here, Safe Eyes lets you block or allow specific programs and websites. This feature worked fine, too. This is a good piece of software, but Pearl Echo and Crawler Parental Controls are better value.

PEARL SOFTWARE Pearl Echo

★★★★

£46 inc VAT

Pearl Software used to make Cybersnoop, an internet-monitoring program for home users. Sadly, Cybersnoop is no more. According to Pearl, however, technically savvy parents sometimes use Pearl Echo, the company's small business software.

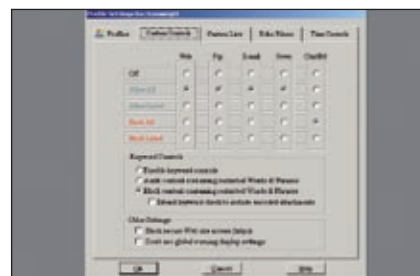
Pearl Echo is different from the other programs here, as it's designed to be installed on a different PC from the one it's monitoring. This could be perfect if your child has their own computer in their bedroom. For the program to work, the two

PCs must be permanently connected on a network. When setting up the server version (you don't need a server operating system to install this as it works under Windows XP) you must specify your server's fixed IP address. If your router doesn't allow you to assign IP addresses permanently, you'll have to get one that does.

Once it's up and running, the program does a good job of preventing inappropriate web access. It passed all of our tests, though it did get a little over eager and block some perfectly legitimate

sites for no obvious reason.

As well as blocking a breast cancer awareness site, the program wouldn't allow us to read the online edition of Scunthorpe's paper. This problem is now so well known as to be a joke, and it's disappointing that a sophisticated program like this can't work around it.



▲ Pearl Echo gives you a few options over the keyword controls you can customise

This program is excellent in many ways. It isn't that difficult to set up, integrates closely with Windows (and with Active Directory, which is a real plus for small business users) and lets you control internet usage across a home or company network. It's great for small business users and IT-minded parents, but you will need to be prepared to find workarounds for the odd idiosyncrasy.

SOLIDOAK CYBERSitter 9.0

★★★★

£24 inc VAT

CYBERSitter looks very old-fashioned. However, it passed all our porn, extremism, gambling and random violence tests without difficulty.

Extra features allow you to block access to the Control Panel, Task Manager and other system components.

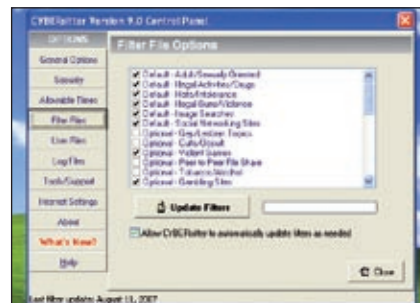
Normally you'd have to use Active Directory to get this level of control, so we were impressed. And even when it did allow users access to these features, they couldn't use them to shut CYBERSitter down; it restarted every time we tried. When you install it,

however, look at the list of available filters straight away and decide which you want to apply. Although the list of things you can block is very long, few of the filters are active by default.

Like CyberPatrol, it blocked inappropriate chats by refusing to accept further communication from the offending party. This lasted for a single chat session. The next time we tried to contact an instant messaging account associated with abusive behaviour, we were able to do so.

Some other features didn't work particularly

well. The program has System Snooper, which searches through internet traces looking for evidence of misuse; the first time we ran it, the feature missed traces of adult sites but incorrectly (we assume) identified some of the cookies from its own site as suspect. We were also



▲ In CYBERSitter, the list of things you can block is very long, but few filters are active by default

frustrated to discover that, although you can configure the program to email you updates of what users are up to, there's no option to enable SSL for your mail server. Almost all mail servers these days use some form of encryption.

This is generally a good program, but a few glitches need to be sorted out before we can wholeheartedly recommend it. **C**

SUMMARY

- ✓ Allows you to monitor several PCs
- ✗ Occasionally blocks harmless sites
- ✗ Requires technical know-how to set up

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE/Me/NT/2000/XP, 2.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 1GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.pearlsw.com
DETAILS www.pearlsw.com

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good filters
- ✓ Advanced features
- ✗ Missed some adult content

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/NT/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 20MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.solidoak.com
DETAILS www.cybersitter.com



MANUFACTURER	CENTIPEDE NETWORKS	CONTENTWATCH	CRAWLER	CYBERPATROL	GUARDWARE	INTERNET SAFETY.COM	PEARL SOFTWARE	SOLIDOAK
PRODUCT	FilterPak	Net Nanny 5.6	Parental Controls	CyberPatrol 7.6	iShield Plus	Safe Eyes 5.0	Pearl Echo	CYBERSitter 9.0
Overall rating	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★
Ease of use	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★	★★★
Features	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★
Performance	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★
User profiles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Windows username integration	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Monitor/record web surfing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes/no website lists	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Blocking page styles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time limit online activity	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Protect privacy	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Monitor/block IM & chat	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Email reporting	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Runs silently	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Browser support	Internet Explorer, Opera, Firefox	Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Netscape, AOL	Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Netscape	Internet Explorer 4, Firefox, Netscape, AOL	Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Netscape, AOL	Internet Explorer, Opera, Firefox	Internet Explorer, Opera, Firefox	Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Netscape, AOL
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Price including VAT	£29	£30	Free	£26	£20	£29	£46	£24
Supplier	Centipede 001 918 524 1010	http://shop.avanquest.com	www.crawlerparental.com	SurfControl 01260 296180	Guardware 08700 660794	www.internetsafety.com	www.pearlsw.com	www.solidoak.com
Details	www.centipede-networks.com	www.netnanny.com	www.crawlerparental.com	www.cyberpatrol.com	www.guardware.co.uk	www.internetsafety.com	www.pearlsw.com	www.cybersitter.com